



Building Social Infrastructure: The role of VPs Finance

What is social infrastructure?

“Social infrastructure” is the set of organizational arrangements and deliberate investments in society’s systems, relationships, and structures that enable society to create a resilient, just, equitable and sustainable world; it includes social, economic, environmental and cultural assets.

Educational institutions can use the idea of social infrastructure as a way to organize and communicate their efforts to create positive social change and sustainable economic prosperity. Communicating this work is an important factor in its success.

Nova Scotia Community College (NSCC) operates under a mandate from the Nova Scotia government to improve the economy and quality of life for Nova Scotians. Over time CFO and Vice President of College Services, Monica Foster, has been pushing the envelope on what this means in practice. Originally guided by a relatively simple drive to “do what’s right,” the NSCC leadership team’s approach has become more sophisticated. Now, they intentionally work toward building economic resilience

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and community wellbeing in the region, informed by frameworks like the UN Sustainable Development Goals.

VPs Finance like Foster often have large and diverse portfolios that contain a multitude of opportunities for impact. Foster’s efforts have included (and are not limited to) changes to the built environments of NSCC campuses,

changes to administrative services, changes to staffing and procurement policies, and the building of trusting relationships with local businesses. Taken together, these make an impact

not just for the people the College interacts with directly, but for the whole community and region.

This paper will use “VPs Finance” to refer to all those who are responsible for directing the financial and administrative affairs of their institutions, but in recognition that specific titles and responsibilities vary widely by institution. Regardless of title, this group will find here some new and valuable opportunities for their institutions to increase their impact and build social infrastructure for Canadian communities.



Framing the opportunity

Canada's advanced education institutions have historically played an important role in shaping Canada's broad economic, governance, and social systems. These systems are currently producing less-than-optimal outcomes, like climate change, rising income inequality, resource scarcity, and ecological degradation. Overcoming these issues to achieve sustainable, shared social and economic prosperity will be a complex, interdisciplinary, and multi-sectoral effort—one that includes changing the state of social infrastructure. Advanced education institutions, by virtue of their influence, expertise, and other assets and resources, are well-positioned to support this change.

Building social infrastructure is a long-term investment, and VPs Finance are often best positioned to figure out how to assign resources to the priorities set by the President (or leader by another title) so that the effort can be sustained effectively over time. Wise investments can lead to outsized long-term returns. For example, investment in energy-efficient buildings can save substantial money long-term, just as investments in mental health, Employee Assistance Programs and other supports for staff (often under the Finance and Admin portfolio) can reduce long term costs of illness, absence, and turnover.

Overseeing resource allocation to educational structure, administrative structure, and built environment is relatively unique to the Finance role and provides unique opportunities to advance overarching projects and initiatives that touch multiple stakeholders, departments, and functions in the institution.

VPs Finance can play a leadership role in their institution by:

- Using their technical expertise to push the boundaries of what is possible within the limits of legal and trade agreements, financing requirements, and administrative policy
- Determining how best to make appropriate resources available for social infrastructure priorities
- Advocating for institutional governance to take a holistic view of risk management, so that social, environmental, and financial outcomes are taken into consideration.

Where to begin?

Understand the current baseline

The term “social infrastructure” is not yet widely shared or understood, so it makes sense to start by taking stock of the current programs, initiatives and investments that are, or could be, included in an overall plan to build social infrastructure.

At NSCC, Foster was already working on a suite of projects including physical accessibility to campus spaces, financial accessibility for students from diverse backgrounds, sustainability projects (NSCC is top ranked among Canadian Colleges with [AASHE’s STARS™ system](https://stars.aashe.org/)¹), and purchasing from local businesses. With support from a consultant, NSCC leadership used social infrastructure as a frame to see that other projects (some already underway, and others new) could complement and advance the school’s broader impact agenda. This inspired Foster to take a broader view of her role.

The projects launched included making workforce development training more accessible, incorporating mental health and wellness in workplace planning, opening common spaces to the public (for winter warm ups), as well as paying living wages and influencing subcontractors to do the same. At the time of writing, NSCC is also in the process of hiring a senior leader to advise the executive and College as a whole on First Nations issues and curriculum. Foster’s job is to find the resources for the role in the budget.

The expanded scope of projects now associated with “social infrastructure building” is indicative of a shift at NSCC toward seeking beneficial economic and social outcomes not just for the people interacting with the institution directly, but for everyone in the region around the College.

Partnerships for procurement

Purchasing and procurement is one of the most direct ways for institutions to use their assets to build relationships and resiliency in the community around them. The office of the VP Finance is often the institution’s source of expertise on the rules and

regulations (CETA, NAFTA, provincial rules for RFPs by government entities, etc.) that prescribe what can be purchased locally. A lot of large purchases will fall under the scope of major trade agreements, but many smaller purchases have more room for discretion. NSCC is trying an approach of encouraging a local business to launch, specifically to serve aggregate demand from several local institutions (Colleges, Hospitals, and others); these businesses can in turn also purchase locally where possible. In so doing, the College supports local businesses (and alumni they employ and serve) while also meeting its own needs.

Be on the pulse of what communities need

The ideas for access to education, business opportunities in procurement, and the value of investments in mental health and wellness come from sustained attention to community needs. Foster has appointed staff members to be responsible for ‘being on the pulse’ of community

needs. Their regular feedback is instrumental for NSCC to stay informed of current issues and trends.

While there are dozens of ‘win-win’ opportunities for institutions to invest in relationships with the community, a more subtle aspect of successfully

meeting community needs is to maintain self-awareness of the power dynamics in the relationship. Michel Piche, VP Finance at Carleton University, played a pivotal leadership role in Carleton’s purchase and redevelopment of the Dominion-Chalmers United Church in downtown Ottawa. The redeveloped space provides security and continuity for the congregation, which was challenged to maintain the site, and it will also provide a multi-purpose downtown performance space for students and faculty at Carleton. Piche was very aware of the relative imbalance in financial and legal expertise between a large University and a small church executive in negotiating a complex real estate transaction. He made a point of not rushing the process so that the creation of a strong and lasting community relationship stayed the top priority—even while under pressure to manage expectations from multiple University stakeholders about the project schedule and finances.

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¹ <https://stars.aashe.org/>

Benefits and opportunities

Institutional successes are told in human stories. Postsecondary institutions prosper by being master storytellers. Annual reports convey stories of people overcoming struggles, and of getting from wherever they are, to where they need to be, through doors that the institution helps them to open.

Social infrastructure building provides a potent narrative framework for institutions to describe their successes in terms of valuable social impacts and outcomes.

The Dominion-Chalmers church is a powerful story for Carleton, and they plan to begin sharing it in earnest in 2019. As noted [on their blog](#)²: “the project will not only provide much-needed space for the university’s growing music program and other departments, it will also continue to serve as a community, cultural and artistic space for the broader Ottawa area.”

“Our purchase of Dominion-Chalmers United Church is perfectly aligned with the university’s mission to play a central role in the cultural life of Ottawa, and it’s a unique solution that allows the church to maintain its historic presence downtown and a gathering place for its congregation,” said Carleton Interim President Alastair Summerlee.

NSCC publishes its own [website of community stories](#)³ that share the outcomes from their investments in access and infrastructure. One such recent story is about the success of the Pathways to Shipbuilding program, which has helped several indigenous students attain academic success, then welding and fabricating diplomas, and finally stable work with Irving Shipbuilding. Sharing the stories of community members’ experiences further leverages the value of the institution’s investment in building social infrastructure.

Overcoming barriers

Piche noted that it took an extraordinary amount of effort to conduct the due diligence work required for the Carleton Board of Governors to approve the final purchase of the site. The project was novel for the University, which has traditionally stayed within the footprint of its main campus, so this brought many new questions about financial and reputational risk to the table. Piche advises to “be patient and do your homework,” and adds that it can take time for people to accept new ideas even if there is a clear business case and vocal support from community members.

The biggest barrier for VPs Finance can be freeing up the internal staff time to advance projects that are (like Carleton’s church acquisition) necessarily labour-intensive and long-term. Support ‘from the top’ is essential to make this happen. Projects are most likely to succeed when they receive broad support and enthusiasm from faculty, staff, and community—along with a boost from a President or other senior leader making the time to ‘sell the dream.’

About McConnell and RECODE

The J.W. McConnell Family Foundation is a pan-Canadian foundation that works toward building a society that is inclusive, reconciled, sustainable and resilient—and that advances progress toward the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals. RECODE, an initiative of the McConnell Foundation, is a call to 21st century postsecondary education that enhances community wellbeing.

As a funder, capacity builder and convener, RECODE supports the capacity of schools to weave social innovation tools and practices into the very fabric of campus and community culture.



² <https://newsroom.carleton.ca/story/dominion-chalmers-carleton-community/>
³ <http://inccnow.ca/community-report/>